

Current Approaches Towards Heritage Planning in the World Heritage City of Valletta – The Role of the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage

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Good morning, everyone. Thank you for joining me today as we explore the role of the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage in safeguarding the unique heritage of Valletta, a UNESCO World Heritage City. The discussion will focus on the current development planning processes in Malta and how the Superintendence works to preserve the cultural integrity of Valletta. Throughout this presentation, I will examine various consultations, assessments, and collaborative efforts aimed at ensuring that new developments enhance rather than detract from this historic urban landscape.

Overview of the Planning Authority and the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage

To better understand the context of our discussion, we must first recognize the Planning Authority as the primary entity responsible for spatial planning and policymaking across the Maltese Islands. This authority is crucial for evaluating development applications, ensuring they adhere to established regulations and contribute positively to the environment.

Since 2016, the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage has become a statutory external consultee to the Planning Authority, specifically regarding land use and development planning applications affecting cultural heritage. This role emphasizes the necessity of integrating cultural heritage considerations into the broader framework of development. For instance, in 2024 alone, the Superintendence received a staggering 12,009 consultation requests from the Planning Authority. This statistic underscores

the importance placed on considering heritage impacts, as all full development applications, along with various amendments, are assessed for their potential effects on Valletta's cultural landscape.

Importance of Consultation

These consultations play a critical role in ensuring that cultural impacts are not merely an afterthought. While the Planning Authority reserves the right to make decisions independent of the Superintendence's recommendations, it is mandated to acknowledge and address these comments seriously. This collaborative approach has fostered a significant improvement in decision-making consistency. In fact, communication between the Superintendence's officers and architects, applicants, and planning officers has reached unprecedented levels, resulting in a marked decrease in cases where decisions are made without consensus.

Proactive Development Engagement

A contemporary practice has emerged wherein architects and developers proactively engage with the Superintendence prior to submitting applications to the Planning Authority. This approach serves to streamline the development process by identifying potential heritage concerns early on, thus minimizing the likelihood of later modifications once substantial commitments have been made.

The Superintendence's assessment process is comprehensive, involving site visits and a range of investigative reports, including photomontages, volumetric studies, and condition reports. Such diligence ensures an informed decision-making process regarding any development proposal.

Furthermore, the Superintendence has recognized the necessity of conducting Heritage Impact Assessments (HIAs), particularly for projects within or in the proximity of World Heritage Sites. The intricate nature of these projects often necessitates an in-depth understanding of their repercussions on both the Outstanding Universal Values (OUVs) and local heritage values such as those of Valletta.

The Superintendence plays a crucial role not only in evaluating development applications but also in providing input on roadworks and Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs). Collaborating with Transport Malta and the Environment and Resources Authority, the Superintendence helps ensure that heritage considerations are woven into all aspects of development across various sectors.

Comprehensive Review

Restoration Method Statements (RMSs) and Works Method Statements (WMSs) are routinely requested and meticulously reviewed to ensure that any undertaken development involving heritage buildings preserves the architectural and cultural integrity of these assets. The Superintendence actively guides and proposes alterations to submitted proposals to safeguard historical values, indicating its commitment to preserving Valletta's unique character. Tailored conditions and bank guarantees are consistently recommended, imposed and managed to ensure development adherence to preservation standards.

Additionally, the Superintendence assists architects and developers through a professional and multi-disciplinary team comprising conservators, architects, and

heritage specialists who oversee restoration projects. All restoration efforts are spatially recorded on GIS and thoroughly documented to permit long-term assessment and review of past practices. They are responsible for ensuring that the approved projects adhere to the agreed method statements, established principles, techniques, and practices designed to maintain authenticity. In 2024 alone, the Superintendence reviewed 1,900 RMS/WMSs and conducted 2,491 inspections on restoration works, highlighting their commitment to vigilant oversight.

Heritage Impact Assessments and the National World Heritage Technical Committee

Earlier, I touched upon the necessity for certain projects to submit a Heritage Impact Assessment. To enhance their expertise in this area, several Superintendence officers recently underwent a comprehensive training course on conducting and assessing HIAs in World Heritage settings offered by ICOMOS. This training emphasized that HIAs are multi-tiered and reflexive, which ultimately guide applicants in fine-tuning their proposals to align with sustainable development principles.

Projects deemed significant enough to require an HIA - such as those that could potentially alter panoramic views or introduce features incongruent with Valletta's historic skyline - are subjected to rigorous scrutiny. For these projects, the Superintendence presents findings to the *National World Heritage Technical Committee* (NWHTC). This committee is a recent initiative aimed at enhancing the regulatory framework surrounding the preservation of World Heritage Sites in Malta. Chaired by His Excellency, the Ambassador of Malta to UNESCO, the committee comprises representatives from various regulatory and operational entities involved in heritage management, including the Superintendence, Heritage Malta, the Planning

Authority, the Environment and Resources Authority, the Restoration and Preservation Directorate and others. By incorporating multi-disciplinary perspectives, the NWHTC aims to ensure that decisions made about development projects impacting Valletta's Outstanding Universal Values are informed by a comprehensive understanding of cultural heritage.

The Committee also invites external experts to enrich its discussions, providing additional insights and knowledge to tackle complex issues likely to arise in development planning. The NWHTC serves as a vital link to UNESCO, facilitating dialogue geared toward preserving Malta's invaluable cultural heritage in its World Heritage locations.

Guiding Development Toward Sustainability and Heritage Integrity

As we navigate the complexities of urban development in Valletta, the guiding principles remain focused on preserving the city's cultural integrity and authenticity. Valletta's architectural heritage is a crucial aspect of its identity. The Superintendence emphasizes the importance of maintaining traditional architectural features that define Valletta's character, such as loggias, louvered windows, and original deffun, i.e., cocciopesto roofs. These elements are more than mere aesthetic considerations; they play a fundamental role in the city's environmental sustainability. For instance, cocciopesto roofs enhance insulation, thus lowering internal temperatures and decreasing reliance on artificial cooling systems. Similarly, wooden louvered windows provide natural ventilation while controlling sunlight exposure, reducing energy consumption.

This sustainable approach not only helps mitigate urban heat island effects but also aligns with broader sustainability goals, such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions and improving overall air quality. The visual integrity of Valletta's skyline is another critical factor. The indiscriminate placement of modern HVAC units on rooftops can disrupt the city's historic aesthetic, diminishing the cultural experience for both residents and visitors. Thoughtful design interventions, such as concealing such installations or integrating them within the existing architectural framework, can ensure that Valletta retains its character while accommodating modern needs.

Moreover, prioritizing the conservation of existing structures over demolition has far-reaching environmental benefits. It reduces the generation of construction waste, decreases the number of vehicle trips needed to transport materials, and cuts down on emissions associated with quarrying and processing new stone. By repurposing and restoring buildings rather than replacing them, we uphold the principles of circular economy and responsible resource management.

Conversely, the over-reliance on materials such as hollow concrete blocks and conventional concrete exacerbates sustainability challenges. Cement production is a major contributor to global CO₂ emissions, and its impact extends beyond the local context. The transportation of raw materials, the energy-intensive nature of cement manufacturing, and the extraction of limestone from Malta's quarries all place significant strain on the environment. By shifting more towards the sensitive reuse of old buildings, more sustainable materials, and innovative construction techniques that minimize the carbon footprint, we can foster an approach that respects both Valletta's heritage and its ecological future.

Ultimately, urban development should not be at odds with conservation efforts. By adopting holistic practices that interconnect heritage conservation with sustainability, we advocate for a conscientious balance between protecting cultural assets and promoting environmental stewardship in its broadest sense. Ensuring that future generations inherit a Valletta that retains its heritage value while being resilient to modern challenges is a responsibility that requires careful planning, commitment, and collaboration among architects, policymakers, and the community at large.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the role of the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage in managing change in Valletta represents a synergistic approach to heritage planning and development. By fostering collaboration among various stakeholders and prioritizing cultural preservation alongside sustainable development, we can ensure that Valletta retains its unique character and significance as a World Heritage City.

As heritage specialists, planners, and policymakers, it is our collective responsibility to navigate the complexities of modern urban development with an eye towards the past. The valuable insights and experiences provided by the Superintendence form a critical foundation for ensuring that our approaches to development not only protect the integrity of our heritage but also enhance the liveability and sustainability of Valletta for future generations.

Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to engaging in meaningful discussions on these important topics.